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Overthrowing Optimistic Emerson: Edgar Allan Poe's Aim to Horrify

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The 19th century writer, Edgar Allan Poe, creates a dark view of the human mind in his poetry, which serves to challenge Ralph Waldo Emerson's popular belief in optimism. The idea of beauty is important in both Poe's and Emerson's thinking, yet Poe's view of atmospheric beauty confronts Emerson's view of truth and intelligence as beauty. The composition of poetry, in Poe's opinion, is a mechanical, rough, and timely process. Poe argues against Emerson's belief that the poet is inspired by an idea, and then effortlessly creates the poem, with the form coming into place naturally. Emerson believes that mankind is in charge of its own destiny, and seeks for higher reasoning. Poe challenges this idea, and argues that the human psyche is instinctual, and therefore humans can not control their desire for the perverse. Further, Poe overthrows Emerson by vastly contributing to the modern literary analysis of poetry. During Poe's life he, "managed to perfect two forms of fiction- the mystery, [and] the horror tale-that have made him have a greater influence on the popular culture of our century than any other writer of the 19th century" (Hoffman 11). Edgar Allan Poe defies Emerson's popular 19th century optimism, by demonstrating the value of beauty over truth, through outlining the importance of structural composition over divine composition, and explaining how the perverse is mankind's desire, not higher reasoning. Poe also prefigures modern literary analysis, which further proves his argument against Emerson's optimism. Poe ultimately displays how his

arguments challenge Emerson's thinking, because they are respected in the present day.

The importance of beauty is found in both Poe and Emerson's thinking, however, Poe challenges Emerson's belief that truth equals beauty. Poe states in, "The Philosophy of Composition," that: "beauty is the atmosphere and the essence of the poem" (1600). In addition, Poe says that, "passion or even truth, may not be introduced, into a poem, [they only serve to], aid in the general effect" (1600). This general effect is beauty, which is the aim of the poem; passion and truth only help to create the poet's goal of beauty. This argues Emerson's point in his essay, "Nature," as he says: "the true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both" (47). Emerson defines truth or intelligence as equal to beauty, because he believes that by knowing the great truths one can achieve higher reasoning. Poe challenges Emerson's idea by creating beautiful poetry which contains, "that intense and pure elevation of soul- not of intellect" (1600). This feeling that Poe describes is what he believes beauty truly is. In, "The Raven," Poe creates what he believes is true beauty:

Prophet! said I, 'thing of evil! prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us- by that God we both adore-
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore-
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore."

Quoth the raven, "Nevermore." (1521)

This stanza displays the beauty which is the essence of the poem as it reaches the climax. Consequently, this serves as what Poe calls the "pure elevation of the soul" (1600). There is no need for the truth and reasoning that Emerson says is beauty. Poe challenges Emerson's belief of beauty defined by truth. Poe strategically uses his poem, "The Raven," as an example for his argument against Emerson, in his essay, "The Philosophy of Composition." This poem perfectly displays Poe's argument that beauty is an elevating feeling found in his poetry. This feeling is predetermined by Poe, which shows how much work the poet must put into the poem to create the feeling of beauty.

The idea Poe has in mind when it comes to composition, is that the work is created through a predetermined, mechanical method, which creates the overall idea in the end. Poe argues against Emerson's thinking, and challenges his belief that the thought makes the poem, and the structure comes naturally with the thought. For instance, Emerson states this in his essay, "The Poet":

For it is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a

poem,- a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. (190)

Emerson believes the poet is like a philosopher and produces divine ideas through putting nature into words. Therefore, he believes that structuring the poem comes naturally with the idea. Poe defies Emerson's idea by explaining in, "The Philosophy of Composition," how poems are structured and created tediously through constant editing in order to arrive at the central idea:

Most writers- poets in especial- prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy- an ecstatic intuition- and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought. (1598)

This description of the poet as human is quite realistic, and serves to defy Emerson's view of the poet as a 'divine philosopher'. Poe even uses his poem, "The Raven", as an example in his critical essay, "The Philosophy of Composition," to show the reader how he created this popular poem through precise measures:

I select "The Raven," as the most generally known. It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referrible either to accident or intuition- that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem. (1599)

Poe has a solid argument against Emerson's idea of how a work of literature is composed, because he is able to back up his idea of using precise structure in his own poetry, and also as a respected literary critic. An example of Poe's criticism is, "The Philosophy of Composition," which is essentially the, "portrayal of the poetic act of creation not as a spontaneous overflowing of inspiration but as the conscious embodiment in verse by a craftsman of his predetermined ideas" (Hoffman 12). In this critical essay, the poet is seen in a revealing light that exposes all of the flaws and hard work that goes into creating a poem, or any work of literature. Conversely, Emerson envisions the poet as someone who is able to become a part of nature and inspired by the divine to easily create the perfect work. However, due to Poe's argument, the artist is now seen as a skilled craftsman who knows the complexities involved in creating the work.

In Emerson's view mankind can achieve higher reasoning, and has an ingrained desire to find truth, and reach a divine state. Poe has argued against this view by demonstrating in his works how humans seek their demise, because they are driven by their instincts towards the perverse.

Emerson's view is seen in his poem, "Self Reliance":

Man is his own star; and the soul that can
Render an honest and perfect man,
commands all light, all influence, all fate;
Nothing to him falls early or too late. (93)

This essentially means that humans are in charge of their own destiny. Emerson points out that, human beings are searching for a divine, higher reasoning. Poe challenges this by stating that death is ultimately what we long for, arguing that humans instinctively seek their demise, and retain a primal tendency to lean towards the perverse. For instance, in "The Imp of the Perverse," this desire for darkness is seen: "There is no passion in Nature of so demoniac an impatience as the passion of him who, shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus mediates a plunge" (1591). This argument against Emerson's optimistic view of human beings striving for the divine is strengthened, as Poe says that death is what human beings are striving for, in order to reach unity with the divine. His tendency towards the perverse defies Emerson's optimism and sheds light on the darkness of the human psyche. Poe definitely changed the idea of 19th century optimism as he, "worked hard at structuring his tales of aristocratic madmen, self-tormented murderers, neurasthenic necrophiliacs, and other deviant types so as to produce the greatest possible horrific effects on the reader" (Baym 1510). Through delving into Poe's works, the argument against Emerson's optimism is accomplished by displaying the darkness and perversity resting in the human psyche.

Poe has contributed to modern literary analysis in several ways, which helps to prove his reliability and solid argument against Emerson. Poe is a widely read author to this day, and influences the fictions of mystery and horror. Poe also aimed to become a powerful literary critic, and he has established consistent literary principles (Baym 1509). An example of his criticism is found in, "The Poetic Principle":

It is to be hoped that common sense, in the time to come, will prefer deciding upon a work of art, rather by the impression it makes, by the effect it produces, than by the time it took to impress the effect, or by the amount of "sustained effort" which has been found necessary in effecting the impression. (1607)

This idea that the effect is more important than the effort is common sense and is also found in modern criticism. Poe created this simple yet important assertion, which has predicted modern literary analysis. Along with Poe prefiguring the methods of new criticism, he also influences the fictional forms of mystery and horror. He influences mystery and horror forms through his dark ideas about the perverse and death. These dark

ideas are placed within a melancholy tone and dismal setting, with characters that are desperate and on the verge of insanity. Poe is widely read, and influences many authors to write mysteries and horrors. By prefiguring such modern elements like literary analysis and perfecting forms of fiction, Poe presents himself in a powerful way that overthrows Emerson's popular way of thinking in regards to literature and life.

The popular trust in Emerson's 19th century optimism is denounced by Poe's literary criticism and his donations to the fictional forms of the horror and the mystery. Poe successfully challenges Emerson's ideas about the human psyche, the composition of poetry, and the definition of beauty in poetry and life. Poe's argument that beauty is an elevating feeling is enforced by how, "The Philosophy of Composition," explains that the poem, "The Raven," is an excellent example of this idea of beauty. The idea of using a precise structure to create poetry is argued by Poe through his literary criticism and examples from his own works. The darkness and perversity laying dormant in the human psyche is brought to life through Poe's works. This serves to argue against Emerson's idea of humanity desiring an optimistic idea of higher reasoning, because Poe shows the reader how the instinct for perversity and corruption is ingrained in the mind. Poe believes that human beings actually desire death in order to reach a higher level of existence. By predicting contemporary literary elements, such as analysis and perfecting forms of fiction, Poe presents himself in an influential way that conquers Emerson's way of thinking in regards to the construction of literature and life. Emerson remains a respected author, yet with his optimistic views that impact the literary worlds of the past and present, Poe's work is still able to challenge his thinking. The impact Edgar Allan Poe has made on the present day literary community has inspired the fictional traditions of horror and mystery tales, and his poems are still able to horrify and excite the modern reader.

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